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SUBJECT: TFGG01: RUSSIA-GEORGIA: ANTI-US BACKLASH; NEW
STATUS QUO?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Eric Rubin: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Putin's harshly critical August 11 remarks about U.S. interference and bias in the Russian-Georgian conflict have set the tone for public and private accusations of U.S. encouragement or stage-managing of Saakashvili's decision to attempt to take Tskhinvali by force. The absence of public criticism of Saakashvili or condemnation of the killings in South Ossetia has been portrayed as either Western cynicism or complicity. Among well-connected Kremlin analysts and more moderate observers, we are hearing a consensus that a status quo ante does not exist -- either for Georgia and the separatist conflicts, or for Russia in its relations with the U.S. and Europe. While our contacts dispute any occupation scenario for Tbilisi, the Kosovo model for Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- independence for one, absorption into Russia for the other -- is taken as a given. There is broad support for Russia's return as a preeminent neighborhood power, even as there is little clarity on its construct. End Summary

Putin Sets the Angry Tone

¶2. (C) Putin's angry August 11 remarks casting blame on the U.S. for intensifying the Georgian-Russian conflict have had immediate resonance. With Putin charging that the U.S. transport of Georgian troops back from Iraq "practically to the conflict zone" constituted cynical interference, and his sarcastic jibe at the ability "of several of our partners" to "skillfully categorize the aggressor as a victim of aggression and lay responsibility for the consequences on the victims themselves," the public and private assertions of American stage-managing of the conflict have grown.

¶3. (C) While FM Lavrov's August 12 press statements were slightly more moderate and focused on U.S. apparent inability to control its client, there is pervasive commentary that America orchestrated the hostilities. Anti-American pitbull Mikhail Leontyev was featured on the August 11 nightly news (whose audience has grown by a factor of three during the conflict) directly charging that Saakashvili had acted on Washington orders, with the Secretary giving the Georgian President the green light during her last visit to Tbilisi. Noting that Georgian defense coffers had grown 31-fold under the U.S. umbrella, Leontyev said the maintenance, arming, and training of the GOG forces was an American project. In his telling, Saakashvili had been urged to take on the more vulnerable South Ossetians, to humiliate the Russians and open the door to a forceful resolution of Abkhazia. (Kremlin-friendly youth groups heckled us behind police barriers as we visited the Georgian Charge, yelling through the megaphone that the Embassy had arrived to present the Georgians with their marching orders on their next course of action.)

Kremlin Talking Points on U.S. Culpability

¶4. (C) Reliable conduits of Kremlin/White House attitudes underscore this message. In a heated exchange with us on August 12, Ruling party Duma Deputy Sergey Markov charged that there should be an investigation into how U.S. monies,

weapons, and training were actually used in Georgia. "We heard for four years that U.S.-trained Georgian soldiers would not be used to murder South Ossetians," Markov commented, arguing that the failure of the U.S. to forcefully condemn Saakashvili's military actions in Tskhinvali had deeply disillusioned the Russian elite. Markov, who prides himself on conveying the Kremlin party line, stressed that "no one here sees Saakashvili acting in an individual capacity." Having pleaded with Washington to halt the arming of the GOG, Russians now held the U.S. responsible for the military aftermath. Markov, echoing far more moderate foreign policy observers, justified Russian attacks on Georgian infrastructure and military targets, noting the U.S. bombing of bridges in Belgrade when attempting to stop carnage in Kosovo. "Who are you to complain?" In a less charged language, Director of the Kremlin-funded Center for Effective Politics Gleb Pavlovskiy stressed to us that the "military improvisation" of Saakashvili was a "legitimate conversation topic" that had begged a critical U.S. reaction. "We didn't see one."

No Way Back

15. (C) Our contacts don't believe that Russia is headed for a military takeover of Tbilisi, but are frank in their assessment of a fundamentally different and "irreversible" strategic environment. The nuanced variant of this new Russian bottom line was spelled out to us by Carnegie Center's Dmitriy Simes. According to Simes, Russian strategic objectives, which continue to evolve, include:

- Ensuring that Georgia cannot challenge Abkhazia or South Ossetia militarily, through a legally binding no first use of force agreement that recognizes both conflict territories as co-equals to the agreement;
- Consolidating Abkhazia as a de facto state and recognizing South Ossetia's independence, in order to permit its gradual merger with North Ossetia, with a security buffer around both;
- Impressing upon the Georgian people that Saakashvili's military adventure was "extremely detrimental" to Georgian national interests and "helping them to decide" who is best to lead their country; and
- Working to create a new geo-political environment in the Caucasus with Russia as the new leading power, as well as preeminent power in the former Soviet Union. The message that is being sent to Ukraine, he stressed, is "if trod upon, Russia will bite back hard." Russia, he underscored, will no longer let others tell it what Russian strategic interests are.
- Using all avenues to pressure Saakashvili and encourage the disintegration of his political base, including calls for a Hague-style "war crimes" tribunal.

16. (C) Both Pavlovskiy and Carnegie Center's Dmitriy Trenin emphasized that Russia had not gone as far as it had militarily only to be confronted with a status quo ante, in which Saakashvili could again challenge Russian core interests. If the frozen conflicts and NATO membership had been the key challenges to Russia's policy towards the Caucasus, Trenin maintained that Russian decision makers were intent on using Saakashvili's miscalculation to fundamentally change ground realities. This was the lesson that Putin learned during the war in Chechnya, Trenin explained, when powerful voices (Primakov, Luzhkov, and Chernomyrdin) urged him to declare victory halfway. Putin persisted and won, and was applying this model again. Trenin, Pavlovskiy, and Markov separately agreed that there was no daylight in Russian policy between Putin and Medvedev.

17. (C) When asked whether Russia had underestimated the international reaction to its expansive military operation, our contacts reinforce the fundamental policy disconnect between Russia and the West over culpability. Anger over the

West's failure to condemn the Tskhinvali attacks -- either bilaterally or through the Security Council -- shapes the Russian decision making environment, and continues to represent a strong current in Russian television broadcasts, which portray Western outrage over Gori as cynical. Parallels to Belgrade/Kosovo are more prevalent, with moderate Russian analysts acknowledging the civilian Georgian casualties, but ascribing it to the "collateral damage" inherent in any war, and conservatives dismissing any comparisons between the "genocide" in Tskhinvali and what later ensued.

18. (C) Taking note of our strong condemnation of Russian actions, Trenin acknowledged that there could be no status quo ante in relations between Russia, the U.S. and Europe. The strategic environment, he argued, was "profoundly different." Russia, he predicted, was more ready for this changed playing field than its U.S. and European counterparts. Pavlovskiy also signaled a "fundamental" change in the strategic situation in the Black Sea and Caucasus, one that Russian leaders had yet to fully understand. Noting concern throughout the Caucasus over the events that had transpired, Pavlovskiy said Russia would move to prevent any "vacuum" from emerging that would further destabilize the region.

Saakashvili Who?

19. (C) As Lavrov said publicly, in his remarks with FM Kouchner and Stubb, Russia will no longer engage with Saakashvili, and quite a few Russian contacts refer to U.S. policy towards Hamas as a point of comparison for the GOR decision to ignore the democratically elected leader of Georgia.

Comment

110. (C) To state the obvious, Russian views -- both official and public -- are formed in an entirely different policy context and understanding of "original sin" when analyzing the outbreak of the war. What is brought home from our conversations with policy analysts of widely divergent political views is the consensus that Russia has successfully transformed strategic realities in its neighborhood. Our continued sense, despite the international uproar over Russian actions, is that most Russians are proud of Russia's reemergence and believe it both overdue and inevitable.
RUBIN

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End Cable Text